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Desperately Seeking 'Self-ish' space: the year of Covid-19, lockdown, and making dens

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As I look back on the events of last year, like so many people, my reflections turn to how our home has been central to all that we have done and all that we have experienced. And like so many others during lockdown, our dining room became a classroom, the kitchen table became a meeting space, and the living room became a gym. All this meant our homes became 'contested spaces' (Lefebvre, 1991) and as I recently wrote in a book chapter with my co-author Michal Izak, we have suddenly found ourselves in a space with multiple meanings and uses (Shortt and Izak, 2020). We have appropriated and re-appropriated rooms across the landscape of our domestic spaces and perhaps most predominately, the boundaries between work and home have been well and truly broken and re-established.

As a result of these broken and now very blurry boundaries between work and home, the once private, intimate space of the home has been made (partly) public. Our domestic spaces are more visible now and throughout the pandemic they have been shared with and open to a whole host of people that might not have otherwise been 'invited in'. For lots of us this has included the ongoing avalanche of Teams work calls, the home-schooling video calls, the Zoom quizzes, Facetime with family, Pilates on WhatsApp, and webinars hosted from the garden shed. This visibility, and for some, vulnerability, has meant that the home – typically a place of shelter, retreat, and solitude (Bachelard, 1958) – has been exposed and shared, and indeed we have been exposed during these public broadcasts from our places of refuge. Of course, this experience might not just be limited to interactions with those *outside* the home, but with our own families too. We have all had to share homes spaces during lockdown for prolonged periods of time, being together in a limited number of rooms and lacking the freedoms that we have been used to; popping to the shops, a trip to the park, commuting to work – all those mundane, everyday activities that we took for granted and that drew us out of our homes, even just momentarily, offering another four walls or an expanse of space. Being together in the confines of the home has exposed individual habits, rituals, and behaviours – things we might not have noticed before. Being at home during lockdown has meant we have all have to negotiate and re-negotiate the contested spaces around us – who gets to use the kitchen table for a Teams meeting and when? Who gets to watch TV in the living room in the morning and who gets to use it for a workout in the evening? Who uses the hallway for a work call that means everyone else must be quiet? Even the very people that we share our sanctuary with have had to make compromises.

For me, these complexities associated with the socio-material experiences of space at home during lockdown, and how we have responded to them, were first starkly highlighted by my 5-year-old daughter, Lauren. Throughout this year Lauren has been den-making. I know this is not unusual for a child of her age, and according to Sobel (2002), den-making is a fundamental part of early and middle childhood when children create a hiding space, 'home-away-from-home', removed from parents or siblings. But during lockdown the den-making

was, and continues to be, prolific. I frequently found/find Lauren wandering the house with armfuls of blankets searching for the next den. Given my interest in space and place, I've been recording her den making on my phone, taking pictures of nearly every creation and marvelling at her use of every nook and cranny of our house. They have been made with chairs, pegs, tables, blankets, cushions, sheets, leaves, branches, and umbrellas. They have been inside and outside. Inside the den there have been rice cakes, juice boxes, the dog, the guinea pigs, her tablet, headphones, colouring books, pens, and sticks. They have been made in some of the most awkward spaces in our home – under tables and between bits of furniture. Probably the most ironic thing – she has barely used her *actual* den, the den we made for her last Christmas in the cupboard under the stairs (Harry Potter style). For me, this only served to re-enforce what I have found in my own research – people will seek out their own territories and meaningful dwelling places (Shortt, 2015), and won't often use the ones you make for them in the ways you expect or design. That serves me right for making a den *for her*.



Lauren's abundant den making, was perhaps, her response to sharing her home with us for an extended period – all of us together, all the time, in a limited number of rooms and where those rooms had become somewhat ambiguous in their use. For all of us, the use of the rooms in our home were multiple, varied, and ever-changing and during this pandemic, during this lockdown, the significance of den making was even more crucial for this 5-year-old. Children compromise all the time in relation to space and even their bedrooms often have restrictions placed on them. So, it is no wonder that while in lockdown with her Mum and Dad this child was attempting to claim a snippet of space for her own and drawing new boundaries for herself – even if it was just a few steps on a stairway. For Lauren, lockdown *magnified* the importance of dens and finding a hiding space.

This made me wonder if other people might be experiencing the same thing. Lots of other local parent friends reported the same sort of behaviour, as did a number of 'grown ups'. An entrepreneur I have been working with told me she had been frequenting the roof of her

house for a bit of solitude – taking a cup of tea up to the roof to find a private moment of respite from the rest of her family. An academic colleague of mine had bought a flatpack shed for the garden as a workspace away from the three other family members all working round the kitchen table – she affectionately calls her shed ‘the den’ and has made curtains for it. Students I had spoken to were creating spaces to work on the doorsteps of their student houses – cushion, tea, and laptop in hand – to find solace away from the confines of their bedrooms and away from the rest of their household. Arguably, Lauren, the entrepreneur, the academic, and the students were all making dens of some sort.

This activity and much den making put me in mind of Bachelard’s work *The Poetics of Space* (1958) and his exploration of the home and how we experience intimate places. He reflects on the home as ‘our corner of the world’ (1958/1994, p. 4) where walls create a sense of shelter and protection. But given our changing domestic circumstances this year and how, as I have described above, the characteristics of home as an intimate, private refuge have been tested and questioned due to work/ home boundaries, visibility, and contested shared spaces, this sense of intimacy has been somewhat destabilised.

It seems to me that many of us have sought a sense of refuge in places that go deeper than simply the home itself. Refuge has instead been found in unorthodox hiding places – the *nooks and crannies* of our homes. In some ways we have been desperately seeking dwelling places, however brief, however small, however awkward. We might think of these dens rather like nests, as Bachelard suggests – in nests we take cover, hide away, lie snug and concealed (1958/1994, p.91) and create short term territories that are our own. A nest, he argues is a precarious shelter, but nonetheless there is a sense of security that can be found within them and of course, as in nature, we return to nests in which we feel safe. Bachelard also draws our attention to the humble corner – ‘a sort of half-box, part walls, part door’ (p.137) – where once again we create an imaginary room, a hiding place to take refuge. Lockdown seems to have pushed us into the corners of our homes in a way that seeks to practice self-care, comfort, and well-being. This idea is also reflected in Sobel’s (2002) work that examines children’s forts, dens and bush houses as secret hiding places, where he notes that as children, we gravitate towards corners – a ‘just for me’ space where we cannot be seen (p.8). A den, he suggests, is a “self-ish” space that is detached from ongoing intimate relations with parents, siblings, teachers, and peers’ (p.8), yet I wonder if we ever really lose this in adulthood? Sobel goes on to suggest hiding places like these allow children to control their own environment and enjoy freedom from the rules of the adult world. Given the rules of the adult world have governed so much of what we have experienced in this pandemic year, to the point of restricting the freedoms of home life, it is perhaps unsurprising that both children *and* adults have sought out “self-ish” spaces as sites for momentary control during chaos and where we can enjoy moments of freedom and solitude. Arguably, then, during a pandemic a sense of security can be found in making dens.

Even though so many of us are desperate to leave our houses and socialise again, I am left wondering if Covid-19 and our experiences of lockdown will change the way we look at our homes. Post-pandemic life might involve putting the home under the microscope and thinking about the *details* of our homes, as Bachelard encourages us to do. What corners have we noticed? What temporary nests have provided a new place of refuge? What new patterns of spatial practice have formed and where? Home space rules are being rewritten, new agreements are being made, home and work boundaries are being reimagined. Perhaps after this year, we might be more reflective about our attachments to chosen spots in the home and where *precisely* we find shelter.

I am also left wondering what this all might mean for the return to the office. Not only might many of us have, knowingly or unknowingly, created a sense of refuge and solitude in the corners of our homes, but we might be faced with returning to open-plan, transparent, glass-built places of work. What will it be like going back to wide open, shared, collaborative spaces with the hustle and bustle of colleagues, students, clients, and

customers? Will we miss our dens? Will we make dens at work? Or have the dens and nesting behaviour always been at work, we just never noticed? Perhaps there is more to the dichotomy between transparency/ visibility versus privacy at work, and a more nuanced conversation is needed about what privacy means at work and how it is made, lived and experienced. Perhaps den-making could be a useful lens here. Dens are a 'self-ish' space detached from ongoing intimate relations and a place for 'just me' – and after this year, I don't think den-making is limited to childhood, or even to a lockdown during a pandemic, but is probably an important part of how we respond to constantly being with others and how we seek comfort and protection.

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